

## *Endymion* : The Shepherd Educated

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Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I  
Will trace the story of Endymion.

( I , 34-35 )

### I

'Upon the sides of Latmos' ( I , 63 ), we find the hero in a melancholy mood on 'the day of sacrifice' ( II , 45 ) dedicated to Pan.<sup>1</sup>

As soon as the day breaks, begin to be born in the morning air sights and sounds which suggest a holiday : suddenly joyful cries of children are heard, and a group of them, garlanded, come running into a lawn surrounded by the wood ; in the middle of the lawn, there stands 'a marble altar' ( I , 90 ), around which they gather and wait for something to come to them ; they do not wait for long before they hear 'a faint breath of music' ( I , 115 ) of 'ebon-tippèd flutes' ( I , 147 ) from the depths of the wood ; the sound foretells the arrival of 'young damsels' ( I , 135 ) dancing ; and, after them, 'a crowd of shepherds' ( I , 139 ) walking ; then, 'a venerable priest' ( I , 149 ), followed by 'another crowd of shepherds' ( I , 161-162 ), after which appears the shepherd prince.

In the midst of all the festive mood of the woodland people, it is natural that the cause of his melancholy should 'overwhelm surmise' ( I , 522 ) before we are told that it was 'a bright something' ( I , 602 ) that led him to such a gloomy state of mind — as

gloomy as the wood around him ; he is so despondent over the thing all through the process of the sacrifice that we can not be sure whether he can be attentive to the priest's speech, or act of dedication, and even to the great *Hymn to Pan*. After the chorus, dancing, listening to 'some strange history' ( I , 324 ), and watching 'the quoit-pitchers' ( I , 326 ) and 'the archers' ( I , 332 ) are the things that are attractive to the young ; those who are 'ripe for high contemplating' ( I , 355 ) join the 'shepherds gone in eld' ( I , 358 ) who are gathered in a ring around Endymion and the priest, to talk joyfully about their future life in Elysium. So, the despondency of the woodland lord provides a remarkable contrast to the mood of the people : his figure just reminds us of the malcontented prince in the court of Denmark.<sup>2</sup>

Such is the gnawing pain that causes his patience to wear away that the shepherd faints to be nursed by Peona, his affectionate sister, whose 'little shallop' ( I , 423 ) carries him down a river to her harbour on 'a bowery island' ( I , 428 ), where he is laid on her couch newly made of flower leaves dried with care, and 'quieted to slumberous rest' ( I , 442 ). When he wakes up, it is thanks to the 'healthier brain' ( I , 465 ) that he can tell her sister about an incident which 'overwhelms surmise', causing the deep anguish of his soul: as we are told by Endymion himself, it is the dream he had while sleeping close by 'a magic bed / Of sacred ditamy and poppies red' ( I , 554-555 ) ; it proves, though, that such is not the case. We can not blame Peona when she scolds her brother :

Why pierce high-fronted honour to the quick

For nothing but a dream ?

( I , 759-760 )

because other real incidents of his chief concern are to be revealed to her only after 'a conflicting of shame and ruth' ( I , 761) is erased from 'his pleated brow' ( I , 762).

## II

There have been various versions of the tale told about the moon-goddess who loved the beautiful shepherd and the shepherd who was loved by the goddess ; but so long as we accept a description of their love affair as our general understanding of what happens to them, a romantic difference between the poet's and ours commends itself to our notice. Let me quote it from the elaborate work of classicism by Robert Graves, who writes :

Endymion was lying asleep in a cave on Carian Mount Latmus one still night when Selene first saw him, lay down by his side, and gently kissed his closed eyes. Afterwards, some say, he returned to the same cave and fell into a *dreamless* sleep. This sleep, from which he has never yet awakened, came upon him either at his own request, because he hated the approach of old age ; or because Zeus suspected him of an intrigue with Hera ; or because Selene found that she preferred gently kissing him to being the object of his too fertile passion. In any case, he has never grown a day older, and preserves the bloom of youth on his cheeks. But others say that he lies buried at Olympia, where his four sons ran a race for the vacant throne, which Epeius won.<sup>3</sup> ( italics mine )

For the present, my concern is not physiological, nor do I

argue that the shepherd's sleeping should evolve mythologically ; whether we can sleep without any dream matters little to me, nor do I assert that the hero should sleep a dreamless sleep : all I have to say is that Keats' hero dreams, and in dreaming, he meets the 'bright something' which, we are told, is the cause of his distress.

We will fail, though, to find out the nature of his distress, if we do not keep in mind that the dream results in two new incidents, as he says,

Yes, thrice have I this new enchantment seen. ( I , 918)

Our hero meets it twice when he is awake after it comes to him in his dream ; when he sees 'the same bight face' ( I , 895) he 'tasted' ( I , 895) in his dream smiling in a 'clear well' ( I , 896), he meets it for the second time : it is their first meeting in reality. His third encounter with the thing, however, is not visualized ; it happens screened from our eye when he hurries down into a cave, after only a voice comes to him :

'Endymion ! The cave is quieter  
Than the isle of Delos. Echo hence shall stir  
No sighs but sigh-warm kisses, or light noise  
Of thy combing hand, the while it travelling cloy  
And trembles through my labyrinthine hair .' ( I , 965-969)

Notwithstanding a train of incidents in dream or in reality, nothing occurs which consummates his 'love at first sight' in his dream. We are not told, in spite of Grave's brief comment above on the hero's fertility, whether Keats' Endymion used to have the legendary passion before he meets the 'bright something' in his

dream, but it seems that, as a result of the dream, his passion is aroused, his mind unsteady, and he is marked by a longing for the being. When he meets it for the second time, he is fortunate enough to meet for the first time in reality, but the thing he expects never happens, nor does anything of the sort in the next. Apparently he is in distress, because of the successive failures in consummation throughout these meetings. Then, what is the consummation for ?

### III

We must suspend our disbelief in our immortality for a while in order to understand the shepherd's motive for pilgrimage in view of the dramatic evolution of the poem ; <sup>4</sup> for he wishes, with all his heart, to be immortalized to be happy in life. He commits himself to the wish-fulfilment with such a determination that, if only he can be immortalized, he will not prefer one way to another. But, so long as he remains to be one of the '*dramatis personae*' of the poem which bears his own name, he has no choice but to accept his own prescription given in detail in the long account of the '*Pleasure Thermometer*' ( I , 777-842 ) : to be immortal, he is to be 'full alchemized, and free of space' ; to be 'full alchemized, and free of space', he is to destroy himself ; to destroy himself, he is to enjoy 'fellowship with essence' ; there are many things which can comprise 'essence' ; 'essence' may work friendly to man, coming into being in many forms ; surely, natural piety is one of them, for it is 'self-destroying' enough ; 'But there are / Richer entanglements, enthrallments far / More self-destroying' than natural piety, and the richest and the most 'self-destroying' is 'love', and so is

'friendship' ; he can choose between the two, for they are morally of equal value ; then, how can he take his choice ? — in the first place, their difference does not so much lie in their moral value as in their 'worth' in the mind of man, for both sitting 'high/Upon the forehead of humanity', the 'worth' of the latter is 'more ponderous and bulky' ; but the difference of 'worth' can not be a decisive criterion for his choice ; in the second place, their difference lies in quality, for the specific quality of 'friendship' is steadiness, while that of 'love', novelty ; 'love and friendship' are equally remarkable for alchemy, that is, equally 'self-destroying', but 'love' can 'interknit' our souls more 'wingedly' than 'friendship' : this is the criterion for his choice, whether his choice is right or not. Further, he concludes, though 'love' is 'The mere commingling of passionate breath', it may 'Produce more than our searching witnesseth' ; thence stems the motive of his love-quest, his vain belief that mortal love 'has power to make' us 'immortal', as he says to Peona,

Now, if this earthly love has power to make  
 Men's being mortal, immortal ; to shake  
 Ambition from their memories and brim  
 Their measure of content, what merest whim  
 Seems all this endeavour after fame  
 To one who keeps within his stedfast aim  
 A love immortal, an immortal too. ( I , 843-849)

#### IV

Even though Endymion as a legendary figure is a fair youth

loved by a goddess who is passionately in love with him, — loved while sleeping without any consciousness of being loved, Keats' Endymion is given an active role in the poem, rather as an ardent lover, which mythologically he is when wide awake, than as a mere object of a female passion, which he is when fast asleep. Therefore, he is to be in search of a further time to love ; the barrenness of the meetings with the stranger, however, has left him not a little disappointed : he promises Peona that he will not let the disappointment reign over his days, but, in Book II, we find our hero wandering 'love-lorn' ( I , 885) for many days

in uncertain ways :

Through wilderness and woods of mossèd oaks,  
Counting his woe-worn minutes by the strokes  
Of the lone woodcutter, ( II, 48-51)

when he sees 'a golden butterfly' ( II, 61) 'softly pight' ( II, 60) on a flower he holds in his hand. Following the creature, when it flies up, he comes upon 'a nymph uprisen to the breast' ( II, 98) in a 'fountain's pebbly margin' ( II, 99), who foretells his destiny, as follows :

thou must wander far

In other regions, past the scanty bar  
To mortal steps, before thou canst be ta'en  
From every wasting sigh, from every pain,  
Into the gentle bosom of thy love. ( II, 123-127)

When the nymph suddenly vanishes from his sight, there comes up, from a 'deep cavern' ( II, 199) a voice calling on

Endymion to descend 'through the hollow, /The silent mysteries of earth' ( II, 213-214). Though I have no time to spare to recount what Venus does to Adonis sleeping underground, in the very presence of our hero, yet, it would be undeniable that the scene presents to Endymion a love exemplary in terms of sensuality ; for 'the mighty prize' ( II, 592) for which he has been in search is waiting for him in 'the gusty deep' ( II, 853).

Despite the fact that the identity of 'the fair visitant' ( II, 851) was already half revealed to Endymion by Venus' words : 'I could hear he loved/Some fair immortal' ( II, 567-568), he seems to be rather indifferent as to whether she is celestial or earthly, though, in his account of the 'Pleasure Thermometer', the 'essence' of his choice was 'earthly love' ( I, 843), as he phrased it. The eroticism Peona herself must have felt in her brother's 'dream within dream' ( I, 633) culminates when 'the fair visitant' acts as if she were the daemonic<sup>5</sup> visitor to the male dream of sexual fantasies.<sup>6</sup> The premonition he has that the seemingly decisive moment is approaching makes him exclaim, 'I feel immortal ! ' ( II, 686) ; yet, the feeling proves to be of no avail, because, though he is granted an immortal passion after the consummation, when the 'known Unknown' ( II, 739) declares, 'An immortality of passion's thine' ( II, 808), with no sense of immediate alteration of his identity, with no sense of metamorphosis expected coming to him, he can not be positive yet that he himself is now immortal as the result of 'The mere commingling of passionate breath' ( I, 833) — through sensual love.



## V

By a mere reading backward of the three lines which precede the long account beginning with the 777th line of Book I, a conspicuous arrogance unworthy of the woodland lord will be brought to light :

yet my higher hope  
Is of too wide, too rainbow-large a scope,  
To fret at myriads of earthly wrecks. ( I , 774-776)

So, any evaluation of the shepherd's philosophy of love will fail, unless we take it into consideration that his 'Pleasure Thermometer' account will come to have little significance, if we do not read it in the light of the whole texture of the poem : it has no independency. By 'the whole texture of the poem' I mean the educational prescription for immortality which a 'heavenly board of education' made up to etherialize a shepherd, mythologically famed for such beauty as could turn the goddess, famed for chastity, into a nymphomaniac ; according to the heavenly prescription, I presume, because he happens to mate with a heavenly being, it does not necessarily follow that he can be an immortal ; the first requirement is for our hero to be free of the vice, before he is admitted as an inhabitant of heaven.

If we call the whole texture of the poem heavenly, as it seems to have been prepared in heaven, we are to call the shepherd's own prescription we find in the 'Pleasure Thermometer' account, earthly. As a result of the frustration halfway on his ambitious pilgrimage for immortality, Endymion involuntarily gives up his

earthly prescription for another — for a heavenly one, even though the transition from ‘heavenly’ to ‘earthly’ is brought about in stealth, under the influence of ‘*heavenly power*’ ( III, 708 ), because he is ‘*A youth, by heavenly power loved and led*’ ( III, 708 ), and so long as he is one, though his love produced nothing more than ‘The mere commingling of passionate breath’ — no immortality, it is not for him to be mourning over his fate. After the shepherd prince sees ‘the giant sea above his head’ ( II, 1023 ), the grey-haired Glaucus declares to him:

Oh, weep no more,  
I am a friend to love, to loves of yore.  
Aye, hadst thou never loved an unknown power,  
I had been grieving at this joyous hour. ( III, 299-302 )

Glaucus had a plan for their ‘joyous task’ ( III, 309 ) .

## VI

Loving lonely sports on the sea, Keats’ Glaucus had been an ordinary young fisherman one thousand years before. His misery began when he wished that he could live freely in ‘so dense a breathing stuff’ ( III, 381 ), that is, in the element in which fishes live. Young Glaucus was sincerely in love with beautiful Scylla, while Circe, the fierce witch, envied her for his love for Scylla. Disguised as a beauty of irresistible charm, she made love with Glaucus, but when she proved to be no other than a marine version of ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’, he tried desperately to get rid of her magic spell only to find himself beside the corpse of Scylla.

When he barely finished her burial in the marine, he knew that the curse of the witch deprived him of his youth ; moreover, he was to survive her love as long as one thousand years, with his limbs 'Gaunt, withered, sapless, feeble, cramped, and lame' ( III, 638 ), to death. There seemed to be no hope of his salvation, but one day, when 'an old man's hand' ( III, 669 ), emerging from under the water, handed him a scroll and a wand, things changed : on the scroll was written a prescription for Glaucus' salvation, perhaps the know-how of it as well, and the wand was the first implement to be used for it. When Endymion broke the wand against a lyre on a pedestal, as he was told to do by the would-be sea-god, a series of miracles began to occur. Not only could Endymion liberate Glaucus and his Scylla from Circe's curse, but he could re-animate 'All lovers whom fell storms have doomed to die/Throughout' ( III, 722-723 ) the ten centuries of fate.

The salvaging of the lives of the people, in the literal sense of the word, must have been a new experience to Endymion, who used to be too proud 'To fret at myriads of earthly wrecks' ( I , 776 ) ; he must have been certain that another 'fellowship' ( I , 779 ) with the other constituent of 'the crown' ( I , 800 ) had been achieved ; so we could not blame him, if he had hoped anew that his wish would be fulfilled through the very 'fellowship' with it — with 'friendship' ( I , 801 ). It is the rigid law of things on earth, however, that no living creature can survive the mortal shock ; therefore, just because he had been successful so far in mere 'fellowship with essence' ( I , 779 ) — with 'love and friendship' ( I , 801 ), it does not follow, however the shepherd tried to be immortal, that he, as a result, could expect to be 'full alchemized, and free of space' ( I , 780 ). On the other hand, now that the spectacular performance of philanthropy sponsored by his marine

friend is over, we may well expect from Endymion, a lyrical cry like

Oh, I have been  
Presumptuous against love, ..... ( IV, 638-639 )

It may be beyond our belief how the board of heaven work, but how can they ignore the redeeming quality of such an unselfish deed? We might know the answer by a few revelations of their spokeswomen. The fact was that the first decree concerning his heavenly ascent had been issued from the board, which we know by Venus' words immediately after the salvaging, saying,

What, not yet  
Escaped from dull mortality's harsh net?  
A little patience, youth! 'Twill not be long,  
Or I am skillless quite. ( III, 906-909 )

Later, 'words' ( III, 1020 ) , probably those of the Moon, would provide a guarantee that the goddess' words were true :

*Immortal bliss for me too hast thou won.* ( III, 1024 )

But 'a little patience' was necessary; for Glaucus was informed of the know-how of his own salvation prepared by the board, when Endymion was not; he knew no more than we do where the ladder is located to help immortals, newly born on earth, with their ascending heavenward: all he could do was to wait for any means of ascension to manifest itself to his senses, or for a guide to lead him to heaven; only, even in company with the Indian maid, he was quite unaware of the very presence of the heavenly guide.

Since 'There blossomed suddenly a magic bed/ Of ditamy and

poppies red' ( I , 554-555) when our hero 'wondered greatly, knowing well /That but one night had wrought this flowery spell' ( I , 556-557 ), supernatural phenomena have not been unusual in *Endymion*; since then, the heavenly sway has been predominant over the earth; and, in so far as our hero is concerned, he has been under the influence of the Moon; yet his sister has never been: when the ladder comes as a miracle, it is no wonder Peona goes home 'in wonderment' ( IV, 1003 ),<sup>7</sup> her dear brother having been snatched 'into endless heaven' ( III, 1027).

### Notes

1. Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* ( University of Illinois Press, 1985), p. 36, writes : 'Endymion's first appearance is marked by a melancholy mood indicative of the psychological context in which the dreaming imagination typically comes to life in Keats's poetry'.
2. Waldoff, *ibid.*, pp. 36-37, writes: 'His first appearance with "A lurking trouble in his nether lip" may owe something to the conventional melancholy of the courtly love tradition, or more directly, to the dark brooding of the Byronic hero, but it is a consistent feature of his character'.
3. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths:1* ( Penguin Books, 1955), p. 210.
4. Waldoff, *op. cit.*, p. 36, writes: 'My concern is the way *Endymion* dramatizes the character of the poet's imagination'.
5. Looking at the adjective, I call to mind the erudition of Charles I. Patterson, Jr., *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats* ( University of Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 22-100.
6. Wolf Z. Hirst, *John Keats* ( Boston : Twayne Publishers, 1981)

p. 67, writes: 'The heavenly Cynthia may stand for our erotic dream fantasies and the Indian maiden for the woman we actually meet when awake'.

7. Hirst, *ibid.*, writes: 'As Endymion bids her and his sister Peona a final farewell, the Indian is suddenly transformed into the Goddess Cynthia and the two lovers disappear so abruptly (rather abruptly ending Keats's romance) that we cannot blame Peona for going "Home through the gloomy wood in wonderment" (IV. 1003)'.

#### Note on the text

All quotations of *Endymion* are taken from *The Poems of John Keats*, edited by Miriam Allott (Longman, 1970).

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